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ABSTRACT

This report studies the potential function of poetry as a literary genre to be used in language instruction. Strategies and tactics which are designed to develop the four basic skills, advanced as fundamental objectives of audiolingual programs, are delineated through a section on guidelines for teaching language through literature. The author examines three phases of classwork which involve study of the poem's surface, inner, and personal meaning. Poetry selection, methodology, and the use of the target language are discussed. Special emphasis is given to the need to adopt a Socratic method for the study of poetry. (RL)

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A continuing series of concise papers each focusing attention on a current problem of foreign language teaching and learning.

Number 15

# Poems in Early Foreign Language Instruction

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# POEMS IN EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Poetry, more than any other literary genre, lends itself to foreign language teaching that seeks to develop all four skills, and it helps to emphasize as well silent reading, translation, and grammar analysis.

The reasons are as follows:

1. Since poems are basically oral literature (intended to be read aloud or recited), the skills of listening-comprehension and speaking can constitute an integral, and completely natural, part of the teaching process.

2. Because repeated reading and recitation and, indeed, memorization, are intrinsic to the appreciation of this genre, the use of poems provides built-in practice leading to the automatic assimilation of vocabulary, structures and sound patterns, and the refinement of pronunciation.

3. In order to be fully experienced and enjoyed, poems should be recited or read dramatically; they should be "performed"by the students. Oral interpretation of literature creates motivation and interest by actively involving the students in the utilization of their gestural, emotional, theatrical, vocal, and aesthetic, as well as visual, sensibilities.

4. Poems are concise works of literature and only short poems should be selected for teaching language skills. These characteristics foster sustained interest and will allow the unhurried approach so essential to the enjoyment of literature. Brevity also encourages thorough linguistic and intellectual assimilation of the work, rather than a mere superficial acquaintance which would leave both student and teacher dissatisfied.

## Guidelines for Teaching Language through Literature [1]

1. As humanists who are language teachers, we have the responsibility of stimulating students to enjoy and benefit from the humanistic values of literature; but as language teachers who are also humanists, we must remember that our primary professional function is to develop the students' language skills. Whenever the teacher uses a work of literature, such as a poem, in a foreign language class, he should always keep this primary goal in mind and not allow himself to be sidetracked into teaching literature per se. He should use literature as a vehicle for language instruction and, if he is anxious that he might be "degrading" literature to a mere tool or instrument, let him remember that the teaching and learning of foreign languages is the very soul of the humanistic quest.

2. Poems, like most works of literature, are capable of many levels of interpretation, from casual, emotional enjoyment to esoteric intellectual analysis. There are many degrees between, frequently overlapping in their divergent dimensions. With few exceptions poets write for laymen and not for the literary scholar. The FL teacher is therefore entitled to tailor the interpretative discussion of the poem to the linguistic ability, maturity, and background of his students.

3. Although the primary objective is the teaching of language, the teacher may nevertheless wish to carry the explication of the poem as far as possible despite the problems of communication in the target language, as long as—and this is the cardinal rule—he does not allow himself or the students, to fall into English. It is better to forego an erudite interpretative point than to allow the class to deteriorate into the linguistic chaos of half target language, half English. Students who wish to make a point in English, should be requested to speak to the teacher after class and, if of general interest, the student's comment can be reformulated in the target language and presented to the class at the next meeting.

4. As stated in 3. above, the teacher should firmly prevent the class from "falling" into English. The word "falling" is used deliberately because it suggests the unplanned, unintentional, and perhaps unconscious, use of English which might threaten to turn the foreign language class into a mere literature class. While such uncontrolled use of English must be avoided completely, there might be instances when it would be tactically better to use English for pedagogic reasons. Such cases may involve:

a. "Checking out" that the students have understood an explanation in the target language by asking the class at the end (in the target language): "How would you say this in English?" and allowing them to answer in English.

b. Giving a meaning in English if, after repeated efforts, the teacher has been unable to communicate the meaning by staying in the target language.

c. Glossing of selected, difficult words or expressions in the text handed to the students (see below).

5. The poem should be used as a vehicle for language instruction, but this does not mean that the poem should be reduced to a grammatical exercise. All grammatical explanations should be avoided unless they are necessary to a fuller understanding of the poem as a work of art. Nor should the poem be used for pattern practice or other grammar exercises. [2]

6. The interpretation of the poem should be undertaken through questions and discussion and under no circumstances should there be a solo performance by the teacher, such as a prepared lecture.

7. The interpretative discussion should at all times be focused on the text in an effort to derive understanding from the poem itself rather than from secondary sources. Unless directly relevant to a better appreciation of the poem, there is no need to deal with the circumstances that may have triggered its creation, the life of the poet, or the history of literary scholarship regarding the poem. While the teacher should probably be aware of or acquainted with secondary sources, these are not necessary for the student at the level where literature is used as an occasional instrument for language teaching.

8. The work on the poem in class should involve three phases:

A. Surface (or factual) Meaning which aims at clarifying the verbatim, objective meaning of lexical items, structural complexities, and concrete data, such as historic references, geographic places, proper names, etc. In this phase the foreign language teacher's task differs radically from that of the teacher of

English presenting literature to native speakers of English. The latter may be able to launch directly or simultaneously into the second, or interpretative, phase through questions dealing with the leading theme, the manner in which the poet explores it, or how form and content crystallize into a whole. This difference must be at all times uppermost in the foreign language teacher's mind: he must make sure that his students have comprehended the surface meaning of the poem just as if it had been translated into English (as was done in the more traditional approach) but without actually translating. This presents a formidable task and an exhilarating challenge to the FL teacher's imagination, ingenuity, patience, and professional know-how.

B. Inner (or conceptual) Meaning which aims at exploring the ideas that may be hidden beneath the surface meaning and are only hinted at or suggested. In delving into the inner meaning there are, of course, no set steps to follow or fixed answers to be found. As is well-known, respected experts usually differ in their interpretations of the deeper meanings of works of art. Nevertheless we may say that a responsible interpretation based on close reading of the text will seek to discover whether the specific details of the poem are consonant with the overall interpretation and whether the latter, in turn, will be consistent with the details and confirm the specific. In addition, questions can be raised about:

a. the ambiguity of meaning: the simplicity of the surface meaning may be deceptive. Due to ambiguity, i.e., words having meanings on several levels, this simplicity may develop a complexity which needs to be explored.

b. the symbolic meaning: words used as symbols may bring to mind something other than the surface meaning, and what the word may stand for will invite exploration.

c. the emotional power: this may involve exploration of the interplay of meaning and sound used in order to create a certain mood. While the use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, and other simple poetic devices such as the rhyme scheme are surely worth investigating, it would, at this level, be counterproductive to the primary aim of language teaching to delve into more complex poetic techniques unless their recognition is absolutely necessary for the understanding of the poem.

d. the imagery: how the poet uses word-pictures or other verbalizations to evoke impressions of sounds, odors, feelings, and other sense experiences will yield much classroom discussion in which the target language can be actively used. The same holds true for the investigation of the poet's use of similes and metaphors in order to discover how he applies the poetic techniques of comparison. Do his figures of speech, for example, compare things directly or indirectly, does he say "the unknown equals the known," "the known is like the known," or "X more-or-less-equals Y"?

C. Personal Meaning which aims at involving the students in a personal confrontation with the poem at whichever level they choose, emotional and/or intellectual. To deny them this personal identification with the poem would be a grave psychological error and "turn off" many a student just at the point where literature might have turned him on. Nor, of course, should the teacher inhibit the students by imposing on them his own view of how they should respond. Since our aim at this level is to activate the target language by using materials which

stimulate the class to become involved, students should be encouraged to express their views—as long as they attempt to do so in the target language. All opinions deserve a thoughtful response even though they may run counter to those of the teacher or to other established interpretations.

In summary, the teacher should aim at a group interpretation by involving the entire class in a give-and-take discussion which leads them to discern poetic concepts while developing their vocabulary and fluency in the target language.

## Selecting the Poem

There are many valid reasons for choosing a poem; the poem happens to be in the text, or the teacher has studied it in graduate school, or it has been his favorite for thirty years should not be regarded as important criteria. More pertinent to the selection of the poem are the following considerations: it should be within the language ability of the students; it should be short; and it should be topically appealing to the students by being relevant to their age group, current issues which concern them, or their normal sphere of aesthetic enjoyment. Modern anthologies published in the foreign country, magazines, newspapers, and periodicals directed at young people may be better sources for poems than the traditional texts. The lyrics of modern folksongs, protest songs, and even popular hits (the Beatles in French or German translation, or Charles Aznavour in the original) are also worth investigating. The very best source for an occasional poem for language teaching may be the students themselves.

## Steps in Preparation for the Class

1. Ditto or mimeograph the poem with a number facing each line for easy reference. During the class discussion the teacher and students will always refer to the line(s) by number with a sentence in the target language like "Please look at line seven" or "In which line do you see this?"

2. In the margin, gloss all words and expressions for which an explanation of their meaning in class in the target language would be counterproductive. Counterproductivity results when too much time is consumed in an explanation without definite assurance that the students will understand. Glossing may be done in two ways: (1) target language→target language (un lambeau: un morceau arraché; schildern: beschreiben) or (2) target language→English (un lambeau: a torn piece; schildern: to describe).

3. Prepare visuals (perhaps only drawings on the blackboard) for words and expressions whose meanings can efficiently and interestingly be communicated through the eye.

4. Review in your own mind the points that you wish to make in the discussion and the questions that could lead the students to discover these points; make a list of all key words necessary in the teaching strategy that you plan to follow; ditto a list of new key words that you plan to use, or that may occur, and distribute it to the students. If appropriate, these words might be glossed. Each word should be numbered for easy reference.

5. Secure a commercial recording of the poem if one is available. If none exists, make your own tape recording or have a qualified speaker do it. If you have a commercial recording, it might be useful to dub it on a tape for easier handling (as in the replaying of certain sections), and the opportunity to insert pauses so that students can repeat what they have heard.[3]

## Steps in Classroom Presentation

1. Recite (read aloud) the poem to students or play the record or tape. This may be done several times.

2. Distribute the mimeographed poem and read it several times while students follow the text.

3. Break the poem into thought-groups and model them, having the students echo in chorus and at times individually. If using a recording (record or tape) use the pause control to allow for echoing or use a tape especially prepared with pauses.

4. Go through the poem line by line and stanza by stanza to communicate surface meaning.

5. Deal with the poem as a whole—but always refer to specific lines—to ferret out through group interpretation the inner meaning.

6. Seek to elicit the personal meaning that the poem may have for each student through oral and/or written expressions in the classroom or in home assignments. The written reactions should be held to a maximum of ten lines. They should be described as "My Personal Reaction" (in the target language, of course) rather than with the forbidding term "Interpretation."

7. Correct the written work and return it as soon as possible. Since students are usually interested in the opinions of their classmates, the written work can be used for further discussion and as a stimulus to reactivate the vocabulary and structures of the poem itself and of the preceding class discussions. In order to insure full participation, it would be useful to have each student read his corrected homework to the class while the class follows it on ditto, the blackboard or by means of an overhead projector.

8. Voluntary assignments to challenge the more eager students might include a "poetic" translation of the poem into English or the writing of a poem on the same theme in the target language. These written, voluntary assignments can again be used for further activation of the target language in class. Students might also be encouraged through special incentive rewards, such as "extra credit," to memorize and recite the poem. This memorization can be facilitated by the use of the tape recording.

## How to Stay Within Target Language

Assuming that the entire course has been conducted in the target language and the rule that students should use only that language in the classroom has

been rigorously enforced by the teacher, the transition to the occasional use of a poem as a vehicle for language instruction should be accomplished without major difficulties.

In experimenting with the use of poetry, the teacher might consider the art of Socratic Questioning for all three phases (Surface, Inner, and Personal Meaning) of the discussion in order to accomplish the primary aim of activating the target language by staying within the target language.

Socratic Questioning consists essentially of formulating questions in such a way as to guide the student step by step to a final answer and level of understanding. The cardinal principle to apply here is to ask questions not to find out what the students know, but to ask questions that will help the students learn. In Socratic Questioning, questions are not asked to test but to teach. Since teachers are, by training, accustomed to asking questions to test, they must make a determined—and sometimes difficult—effort to change their role, from examiner, to the Socratic "midwife"—a term used by Socrates in describing his method—in order to help the student find an answer, and find it in the target language.

When engaged in the arduous task of staying in the target language in the three phases of group interpretation, the teacher may at times feel that this procedure is nothing but a waste of time. Why proceed so slowly when a problem could be solved easily by speaking English?[4]

In such understandable moments of doubt, the teacher might reexamine his priorities (teaching of language or literature?) and take comfort in the fact that what may appear a waste of time and merely incidental to the discussion of the poem, is, on the contrary, the very means for achieving the primary goal, the development of the students' language skills. Properly conducted, the Socratic procedure is bound to increase the students' fluency and vocabulary precisely because it allows for exclusive use of the target language. The "means" of using the target language becomes the "end," and indeed, means and end merge into one as the teacher and class become engaged in a natural audiolingual situation in which the target language is not used in simulated circumstances (such as a dialogue about going skiing or ordering a meal in a restaurant)[5] but for the live and authentic purpose of investigating a literary work. Similar scenes might occur at any time in France in French, in Spain in Spanish, and in Russia in Russian.

## Specific Strategies and Tactics

In a sense Socrates was the first pedagogue to employ the techniques of programmed learning. He broke down the subject matter into small steps, each step deliberately building on the previous one, and through a series of easily answered questions, led the interlocutor to the discovery of the aimed-at terminal answer. By relying on feedback, he would know immediately if it were necessary to retrace or reformulate the questions in order to obtain the desired results.[6] Now and then Socrates would "branch" his students through a series of circumjacent questions when he found the going too difficult by the most direct route. All of the above teaching strategies should be applied by the FL

teacher when he engages in the presentation of the poem. In addition, the teacher may employ some of the following specific teaching tactics when using the art of Socratic Questioning in a foreign language class. These tactics apply most directly to the teaching of Surface Meaning. For techniques more applicable to the teaching of Inner and Personal Meaning, the following references are suggested:


Benamou, Michel. "Some Notes Toward Unfolding the 'Explication de Texte.'" Newsletter Modern Language Association Conference 9 (Nov. 1969), 10-21.

Bird, Thomas E., ed. "The Times and Places for Literature." Foreign Languages: Reading, Literature, and Requirements. Reports of the Working Committees. New York: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1967.

Ciardi, John. How Does a Poem Mean? Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960.


For illustration, let us pretend that the word "telescope" has occurred in a poem being taught to Japanese students learning English as second language. Lines 7, 8, and 9 in which the word appears are:

7 His thoughts
8 a telescope of time
9 raced back to nothingness.

The teacher is trying to convey the meaning of "telescope" by using English exclusively. He would, of course, not use all of the tactics listed below. He would try one, and if it did not work, try others until he could ascertain through feedback that most of the students had understood. Some of these tactics will be familiar to the FL teacher from the marginal glosses used in audiolingual texts to explain the meaning of words within the target language.[7] In class it becomes now a matter of applying them orally.

1. Antonym:
"What is the opposite of a telescope?" (A microscope).

2. Synonym:
(This tactic won't work here. If the word had been, for example, "binoculars," the synonym "field glasses" would have been useful).

3. Reference to the Known:
"What did Galileo use to observe the stars?" (In a case like this the need for the FL teacher's cultural education becomes apparent. An Oriental astronomer who is known to the Japanese students would, of course, be more appropriate).

4. True or False:
"Say whether this is true or false: a telescope makes objects appear closer." (This tactic, incidentally, can be used most effectively in the form of feedback questions to ascertain whether students have understood a point previously made).

5. Multiple Choice:
"Choose A, B, or C. With a telescope one can A. hear well, B. see far, C. speak louder." (The student would respond by giving the proper answer

in the target language. In order to instigate more participation the teacher could ask for raised hands after stating each letter again).

6. Circumlocution:
"A telescope is an instrument with which one can see things that are far away much closer and better." (As in all these cases, care must be taken not to use words that are more difficult than the one the teacher is trying to explain. Circumlocution is the art of describing in simpler words whatever one wants to explain.)

7. Derivation:
"Telescope comes from the Greek language: tele means far away and skopein means to look at. So it means to look at something far away." (While the use of Greek words may seem to complicate matters, it actually simplifies by permitting the use of synonyms that are elementary in English: look and far away).

8. Purpose:
"What is a telescope used for? To look at things that are far away and make them appear nearer and bigger."

9. Expansion:
"Look at lines 7 and 8. 'His thoughts / a telescope of time.' I'll add something to give you more information about the word telescope. His thoughts were like a telescope that brought the time of the past much closer to him." (Expansion consists of adding new words that will give more information about the context. A sentence with a nonsense word in it like "He takkamau the house" becomes meaningful by added "red." In this case, takkamau means "painted.")

10. New Context:
"He held a telescope to his eye. He looked at the ship in the distance. Now he could see the colors of the flag and read the name of the ship." (This tactic consists of placing the unknown word into a different and more easily identifiable context.)

11. Statistics:
"How many eyes does one use with a telescope?— and with binoculars?" (Statistics consists of relating the unknown concept to some relevant measurement such as quantity, size, length, etc. For example, to explain the word year: "Twelve months make up a year"; or the word Earth: "The Earth is one of the seven planets. The others are Venus, Jupiter, etc." As is seen in the latter example, these tactics overlap at times. Besides statistics (seven planets), use is made of reference to the known (Jupiter).[7]

Socratic procedures in communicating in a target language may be enhanced by using the following techniques:

a. Suspense or completion:
"A person uses a telescope to look at the . . ." (The teacher leaves the sentence in suspension, thus inviting the students to think with him in the target language and obtaining simultaneous feedback. If several students complete the sentence with a logical word, the teachers know they have understood.)

b. Prompts and cues:
"A person uses a telescope to look at the . . . st . . . sta . . ." (In keeping with the cardinal principle of asking questions to teach rather than test, the teacher gives hints, such as pronouncing the initial sounds of the word he expects for an answer.)

c. Fragmentary answers:
In questions aimed at conveying meaning (rather than questions for practice in structure), the teacher should inform the students that they may answer with just a "fragment" and need not use a complete sentence. The only purpose of the student's answer is to show that he has understood and a key word or two words may suffice. By allowing students to use less than a complete sentence, a student who may know the answer but hesitates to formulate a complete sentence will be encouraged to participate in the class discussion. Of course, this should not prevent the teacher from reformulating the student's fragmentary answer into a complete utterance and perhaps, after modeling it, calling for a group echo.

d. Scanning:
The moment a teacher has called on a specific student he has eliminated the rest from participation in the answer. It is therefore useful, after having asked a question, to scan the entire class for several moments as if searching for who might answer. This helps to keep the class alert and stimulates participation by requiring each one to formulate the answer in his mind, ready to give it if called on.

## Summary

Our purpose has been to present teaching strategies and tactics that will encourage FL teachers to use poems for the teaching of language skills. While poetry is not intended to replace a well-designed text, the occasional use of poems will serve to add a humanistic dimension to the linguistic objectives and will not detract from those objectives so long as the teacher is firmly committed to the use of the target language in the business of teaching the poem and is knowledgeable about the professional ways to go about it.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]An indispensable discussion of this topic is found in "The Times and Places for Literature," Thomas E. Bird, Editor, Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1967, pp. 51-102; order from the MLA Materials Center for $3.75.

[2]In this respect the editors of the excellent periodical Teaching Language through Literature (Jeanne Varney Pleasants, General Editor, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027) appear to differ. They frequently include pattern drills and other grammatical exercises in the suggestions for teaching poems and other works of literature in the classroom and/or laboratory.

[3]To insert pauses on the source material as it is being dubbed on to a blank tape, simply stop the master (tape or record) with the instantaneous pause button. While the master is thus stopped, the tape on which the material is being dubbed continues to run while recording silent space.

[4]Janet K. King ("The Use of Audiolingual Techniques in the Third- and Fourth-Year College Classroom," Foreign Language Annals, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 1968, pp. 185-194) doubts that "explication in English automatically means superior communication" and describes how this precept in her experience has often proved to be illusory.

[5]This is not to suggest that role-playing dialogues have no place in language learning. They are necessary and useful, like many other techniques, when used at the proper time and the appropriate level.

[6]The desired results of Socrates' skillful questioning were, of course, to expose the lack of logic in the interlocutor's supposed knowledge and to lead him to sounder reasoning. While the FL teacher should use Socrates' basic method he should naturally not engage in Socratic Irony.

[7]The profession is indebted to the late Prof. George A. C. Scherer (University of Colorado) for his contributions to this system.

[8]Some of these techniques may be seen in action in my article "Interpretation of a Poem with Younger Students," German Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 4, November 1968, pp. 711-720.

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